

SLBC - Readings from the Dhammapada

Chapter XII. Attavagga

1. *Attānaṃ ce piyaṃ jaññā rakkheyya naṃ surakkhitaṃ
tiṇṇaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ paṭijaggeyya paṇḍito.*

157

If one knows that one loves oneself, let him take good care of himself. At least during one of the three watches of the night, a wise person, man or woman keeps vigil over oneself.

* Several observations on this verse. Please note that we use the word self or *attā* in this context to mean each individual as distinct and different from every other. Each one of us has a personal responsibility and accountability of our own, answerable both in this life and in the lives to come, for the good and bad things we **do. In terms of Buddhist thinking, evil consequences follow when we over-inflate and crystalize this concept to simply solid and tangible notions of I and mine. Be careful ! That leads to ego-notions of *atta-vāda*.

** Secondly we disagree with the Commentarial interpretation which takes the three watches of every single night - *tiṇṇaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ* - as the three stages of life of a human being, namely childhood, adolescence and old age. And instead of being thus watchful over one's behaviour - *paṭijaggeyya* - every day, renders it as 'collect merit for oneself.' This has to be every Buddhist's basic meditation to be undertaken every night, whether done in one's home or at one of the more popular meditation centres.

*** Even after sleepily ploughing through eleven months of the new century and the new millennium, think now seriously of correcting these errors.

2. *Attānaṃ eva paṭhamaṃ paṭirūpe nivesaye
athaññam anusāsaeyya na kilisseyya paṇḍito.*

158

Let one first establish oneself in what is proper and thereafter instruct others.

A wise person will not allow himself to be defiled.

* Note that this verse follows very much from the preceding one. The above verse recommends and prescribes daily vigilance over one's behaviour in order to prevent cumulative defilement that gathers around persons every day. We should have ourselves cleared of our defilements every night. Then alone can one start the new day on a clean sheet. How can we have men and women, claiming to guide others on the path of religion, even with so-called divine mandates issued from Brahma worlds, without clean heads and clean hearts?

3. *Attānaṃ ce tathā kayirā yatha' ññam anusāsati*

sudanto vata dammetha attā hi kira duddamo.

159

If one conducts oneself as one instructs others to be, he would indeed be correcting others while being a very disciplined person himself. For it is one's own self who is very difficult to discipline.

* This verse very emphatically stresses the importance of self-correction as a priority. Here is the need to come to grips with oneself. We got to remind our selves that we dodge and evade self-correction.

4. *Attā hi attano nātho ko hi nātho paro siyā*

attanā ' va sudantena nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ.

160

Oneself, indeed, is one's guide in life. Who else could be one's guide? With a self well disciplined, one discovers a guide who is difficult to find.

* In an age when Buddhists shamelessly continue to kneel before non-Buddhist divinities seeking their grace and the grant of material favours, this simple verse from the Dhammapada should inspire enough confidence and the necessary courage of conviction to work out both their material success in the world and the attainment of their spiritual goals.

5. *Attanā ' va kataṃ pāpaṃ attajaṃ attasambhavaṃ*

abhimanthati dummedhaṃ vajiraṃ v' asmamayaṃ maṇiṃ.

161

The evil done by oneself, which is itself self-born and self-caused, totally ruins the unwise person like the diamond which grinds a hard gem.

* It is wise to be reminded about this silent and unsuspected process of self-ruin which the acts of evil committed by an unwise person brings upon the doer without fail. It is an unfailing and pernicious process of destruction.

6. *Yassa accantadussīlyam māluvā sālaṃ iv' otataṃ*

karoti so tath' attānaṃ yathā naṃ icchati diso.

162

Like a Māluvā creeper which strangles a Sāla tree which it has enwrapped, the person with an extreme degree of moral decadence reduces himself to such a state over which his enemies would rejoice.

* Note here the significance of the reference to the breakdown of moral values or *sīla* among humans. This leads to very precarious vulnerability, exposing humans to a large variety of disasters in society, both physical and moral. It is no secret, for instance, that the breach of the third precept of the *pañcasīla*, i.e. unbridled impropriety of sexual behaviour or *kāmesu micchācārā* exposes men and women to disasters like aids and various other forms of std. or sexually transmitted diseases. Also socially, of persons of very high-ranking positions like presidents of states, prime ministers and their deputies being torn down from their high positions and punished with imprisonment for sex offences of a very wide range. This is what the Dhammapada calls self-wrought ruin. This, it must be admitted, is the result of a complete disregard for personal accountability on which Buddhism lays so much stress.

Chapter XVIII. Malavagga

1. *Paṇḍupalāso' va dāni ' si yamapurisā ' pi ca taṃ upaṭṭhitā*

uyyogamukhe ca tiṭṭhasi pātheyyaṃ pi ca te na vijjati.

235

Now you are like a yellowing autumn leaf. Messengers of death are gathered around you. Now you are at the point of departure from here. As for provisions for the journey, you seem to have none.

* A very grim reminder to everyone of us who has any sense of awareness of death, no matter how old or young we are, or how eminently placed or otherwise.

2. *So karohi dīpaṃ attano khippaṃ vāyāma paṇḍito bhava
niddhantamalo anaṅgano dibbaṃ ariyabhūmiṃ ehisi.* 236

Now you make an island unto yourself. Strive speedily and acquire wisdom. Cleansed of your stains and freed from defilements, you shall enter the realm of the Ariyas.

* The stress here is on the individual personal application of effort by each one for the benefit of each. Do not make a mistake here about Theravādins being selfish or self-seeking. We make no secret of it that without being adequately equipped or adequately qualified, one cannot offer to save others from *samsāra dukkha*. Wisdom and self-purge as primary requirements, are tied together here. That is the only path of ascent to get to higher reaches.

3. *Upanītavayo 'va 'dāni 'si sampayāto 'si yamassa santike
vāso 'pi ca te natthi antarā pātheyyaṃ 'pi ca te na vijjati.* 237

Now you are in the last stages of your life. You have gone to the presence of Death. You have no wayside residence. Nor have you any provision for the journey.

* This verse is a very powerful signal to all of us, announcing the presence of death in close proximity. This is real *Maraṇānussati bhāvanā* or contemplation on Death. We need to prepare, while here, for the journey beyond. The naked question before us, not to be dodged but answered honestly, is 'Have we done what needs to be done, while we are alive and active here?'

4. *Anupubbena medhāvī thokathokaṃ khaṇe khaṇe
kammāro rajatass 'eva niddhame malam attano.* 239

A wise person should cleanse himself of his defilements gradually, bit by bit every moment, like a goldsmith cleaning a piece of silver on which he has to

work.

* This is the real way of working on the Buddhist path to Nirvana or salvation. In Buddhism, we hardly hear of Instant Nirvana like instant coffee and tea. It is emphatically stated that the process is gradual - *anupubbena*. It has also to be continuous and incessant - *khāṇe khāṇe*. And in sustainable instalments - *thokathokaṃ*. That is why the threefold culture of *tisso sikkhā* is said to be successive and is in an ascending order of upward achievement, from *sīla* to *samādhi* and *samādhi* to *paññā*.

5. *Ayasā 'va malaṃ samuṭṭhitaṃ taduṭṭhāya tam eva khādati
evaṃ atidhonacāriṇaṃ sakakammāni nayanti duggatiṃ.*

240

Like rust that has arisen from iron which eats away the iron in which it had its origin, so do the evil deeds of a transgressing monk lead the evil doer to a state of suffering.

* This is a good example of the Buddhist theory of penalties and punishment. Neither the person who punishes nor the punishment itself are external to us. By our own erroneous modes of behaviour we bring about corrosion within ourselves. It is this inner corrosion within ourselves which alienates us from the goal of Nirvana which we seek. The suffering we go through is for the purpose of self-purge [*paṭisamviditvā*].

6. *Asajjhāya-malā mantā anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā
malaṃ vaṇṇassa kosajjaṃ pamādo rakkhato malaṃ.*

241

Non-recitation is the ruin of sacred chants. Non-exertion is the ruin of household living. Laziness or neglect is the ruin of physical beauty [or the ruin of each of the four social groups, each with its specially assigned duties. Carelessness is the ruin of a watchman.

* We would draw special attention to what we would consider here an erroneous translation of the second line of this verse which reads *anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā*. Many translations, particularly the Sinhala ones, render it as 'non-repair is

the bane of houses'. To us, it makes hardly any sense.

We would attribute this to the Commentarial mishandling of the word *anuṭṭhāna*. This, as a noun or verb, is an unmistakably powerful one in Buddhist thinking which refers to striving or energetic application to work by humans. Note statements like *Uṭṭhātā vindate dhanam* which means 'The man who strives earns his wealth.'

7. *Mal' itthiyā duccharitaṃ maccheraṃ dadato malaṃ
malā ve pāpakā dhammā asmiṃ loke paramhi ca.* 242

Impropriety of behaviour tarnishes a woman's character. Stinginess ruins a giver's reputation. Evil ways are ruinous both in this life and in the life after.

Propriety of behaviour, whether of men or women, is a *sine qua non* of any cultured society. Buddhism places the woman, as the would-be-mother of children, in a highly respected position and expects of her, from the very beginning, exemplary behaviour. Chaste behaviour goes as a part of her femininity. The much needed virtue of generosity in a society of vicious economic imbalances, is not to be paralysed with crippling waves of stinginess, generated by misdirected economic theories. Multi-dimensionally viewed, evil patterns of behaviour are not to be condoned in society under any circumstances.

8. *Tato malā malataraṃ avijjā paramaṃ malaṃ
etaṃ malaṃ pahatvāna nimmalā hotha bhikkhavo.* 243

Much more polluting and extremely ruinous is ignorance. It is the worst of the taints. O monks, getting rid of this, cleanse yourselves of taints.

** We believe it is important to take note here of the different grades of stains associated with humans in their daily life. The Dhammapada seems to indicate them at two different levels, social and religious. In our relations with one another as humans, certain ways of thinking and certain modes of behaviour are undeniably anti-social.

They disturb social harmony and damage social coherence. They retard

social efficiency. We need to be alive to these. There can be no samurdhi in a land without an awareness of these. Buddhism alerts us on these. We cannot afford to turn our back on them. That is why the verses of the Dhammapada are for more than mere recital. They are for stimulating the spirit of a Buddhist culture.

In verse No. 241 we were told that a watch-man cannot fail at his post - *pamādo rakkhato malaṃ*. And that a householder cannot afford to be unenterprising - *anuttāna-malā gharā*. Verse No. 243 is more than eloquent on the assertion that, over and above all, one has to work in the field of developing one's wisdom for purposes of spiritual attainments. One has to overcome one's ignorance which is the biggest stumbling block - *avijjā paramaṃ malaṃ*. But most Buddhists seem not to know what wisdom in this context of religion really means. It is wisdom which one has to attain within a frame work of Buddhist grooming. Everybody sitting on a meditation mat cannot get it.

9. *Sujīvaṃ ahirīkena kākasūrena dhaṃsinā*

pakkhandinā pagabbhena saṅkiliṭṭhena jīvitam.

244

Easy is the life of a shameless one who is as impudent as a crow, back-biting, presumptuous, arrogant and corrupt.

** By way of social satire, nothing could be more caustic than the words of this verse. What happens all around us, every day and everywhere, is vividly brought before us. But in a society where the sense of shame against impropriety has totally deserted us, can we ever deliver this message with sufficient impact?

10. *Hirīmatā ca dujjīvaṃ niccaṃ sucigavesinā*

alīnen' appagabbhena suddhājīvena passatā.

245

Hard is the life of a modest person who ever seeks purity, is detached, humble, clean in his way of living and is diligently reflective.

** This is a regular complaint by many so-called good Buddhists that their avowed religiousness makes a comfortable living so difficult. This is too often a

ready-made complaint by people who are themselves not too sure of the stand they should firmly take as Buddhists. They are indeed people who like to have an easy way out of their day to day life problems.

As Buddhists, people must have deep convictions about their religious teachings and hold fast unto their practices. They must stand up to their religious fundamentals, without any fear of the term fundamentalist being considered a stigmatized one. This is ensuring one's *sammādiṭṭhi*, if ever one knows what that is.

11. *Yo pāṇaṃ atipātetī musāvādañ ca bhāsati*
loke adinnaṃ ādiyati paradarañ ca gacchati 246

12. *Surāmerayapānañ ca yo naro anuyuñjati*
idh' eva eso lokasmiṃ mūlaṃ khaṇati attano 247

Whosoever in this world destroys life, speaks what is untrue, takes stealthily from others what is not given, indulges in adulterous behaviour, and is addicted to intoxicating drinks, such a person digs up his own root in this very existence.

** Here is a very fine presentation of the injunctions of the *Pañcasīla* in the verses of the Dhammapada. A very fine instance for us to fully understand the implications of the 3rd precept of *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī*. That it refers to propriety of sex behaviour of men and women or *methuna-samācāra* is clearly indicated here. It is far from referring to the gratification of the fivefold sensual pleasures or *pañca-kāma-guṇā*.

These verses also emphasise the socio-cultural importance of the observance of the *Pañcasīla*. In their breach, for the man or woman who is guilty of it, there is the disaster of a total breakdown here itself, in this very life. Their violation, on the other hand, brings about in society total dread and hostility - *pañca bhayāni pañca verāni*.

13. *Evaṃ bho purisa jānāhi pāpadhammā asaññatā*
mā taṃ lobho adhammo ca ciraṃ dukkhāya randhayuṃ. 248

Know thus, O man given to evil ways of life, that these evil patterns of behaviour are the outcome of recklessness and thoughtlessness - *asaññatā*. That is absence or lack of restraining norms. Let not greed and evil ways drag you to long periods of suffering.

** What is important to note here is that these injunctions of the *Pañcasīla* are always given with the warning that their breach brings about accompanying unhappiness both to the doer as an individual and to the society collectively at the receiving end. Thus we have to take *Pañcasīla* as buffering society against the damages caused by erring individuals. Such menacing individuals are further threatened with suffering in states of purgatory where they got to pay for their crimes and cleanse themselves. *Appahāya pañcaverāni nirayaṃ so upapajjati* says the text.

Chapter X. Daṇḍavagga

1. *Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbe bhāyanti maccuno
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye.*

129

All tremble at being beaten with a rod. All dread at the thought of death. Comparing oneself with others, one should neither cause others to be beaten nor bring about the death of others.

* This verse and a couple of others in this section take up the position of self-stand-judgement. That is that one should always consider how one feels and reacts in any situation, about one's likes or dislikes. This is a well known standard adopted in Buddhism while making admonitions. It is called *attūpanāyika dhammapariyāya* or self-stand-judgement. In other words it is 'Do unto others what you would like others do unto you'.

** This would form an ideal rock bottom foundation for the practice of the first precept of the *Pañcasīla*. This is the ideal basis for the respect of the lives of others - whether one destroys them in defence of oneself or for the sustenance of oneself, by way of food, clothing and shelter.

2. *Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbesaṃ jīvitam piyaṃ
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye.*

130

All tremble at being beaten with a rod. To all life is dear. Comparing oneself with others, one should neither cause others to be beaten nor bring about the death of others.

* This verse makes no secret of the fact of our personal identity when it says *jīvitam piyaṃ*. To this we refer as *attā* in such references as *attānaṃ ce piyaṃ jaññā*. Between this and the Buddhist concept of *anatta* there is obviously no conflict or contradiction. If there was no identity of an individual personality, then the very question of personal liberation would appear to be irrelevant.

** Each *saṃsāric* being in Buddhism is a unit to be reckoned with, but carrying with it all the time its inherent characteristics of *anicca dukkha anatta*. However this phenomenal reality, divorced at the same time from any notions of underlying divinity, carries with it the burden of responsibility and accountability. That is why we say *attanā ' va kataṃ pāpaṃ attanā saṃkilissati*. Remember this is what makes the theory of *kamma* and *saṃsāra* real and meaningful in Buddhism.

3. *Sukhakāmāni bhūtāni yo daṇḍena vihimsati
attano sukhamesāno pecca so na labhate sukhaṃ.*

131

Whoever seeking his own happiness harms with the rod other pleasure-loving beings, such a person experiences no happiness hereafter.

* This verse is very emphatic about the kammic sequence of pleasure and pain in the life of a person through his *saṃsāric* sojourneyings. Viciousness of mind during the activities of the living process precludes the possibility of happiness both here and hereafter. Serenity of mind or *manasā ce pasannena* rewards the doer in the opposite direction - *tato naṃ sukhaṃ anveti*.

4. *Mā ' voca pharusam kañci vuttā paṭivadeyyu taṃ
dukkhā hi sārambhakathā paṭidaṇḍā phuseyyu taṃ.*

133

Speak not harshly to anyone. Those thus addressed will retort back to you. Vindictive talk is indeed painful. You will also be beaten back in turn.

* This verse very keenly sensitises us to the reaction aspect of our own actions. That is what we keep on doing all our lives. Whatever we do, particularly by way of word and deed, provokes reaction from those who are affected by what we do. This is the nature of the world.

** Quite apart from the self-degeneracy we bring upon ourselves by our substandard behaviour, we expose ourselves unnecessarily and unexpectedly to explosive retaliatory action which according to our current social patterns could lead up to utter misery and grief and end up even in death. This advice and warning of the above verse is given equally well to both those who act carelessly without caution and equally well to those who react thoughtlessly without patience.

5. *Sace neresi attānaṃ kaṃso upahato yathā*

Esa patto ' si nibbānaṃ sārambho te na vijjati.

134

If you do not agitate your self and stay silent like a cracked gong, you are well on the path to peace and tranquility which is Nirvana. For no vindictiveness will be found in you.

* What a brilliant verse and what a resounding injunction. ' Agitate not. Keep still and silent like a cracked gong.' The solemn silence of the cracked gong referred to here is amazing. We know how noisy and commanding gongs can be.

** In Nirvana one truly discovers this solidarity and the inability to be ruffled, to be ruffled by anyone or on any account. It is an achievement here and now.

6. *Atha pāpāni kammāni karaṃ bālo na bujjhati*

sehi kammehi dummedho aggidaḍḍho ' va tappati.

136

A foolish person who commits evil deeds knows not the consequences thereof. On account of his own evil deeds that foolish person suffers torment like being burnt by fire.

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* Two very important points come out of the wisdom of the above verse. When we suffer unhappiness in this life of ours, we should not foolishly hasten to ascribe all that to anyone or anything besides ourselves.

** At the same time, not all experience that people go through in life is the result of activities of their previous life. It is also the outcome of their own errors of judgement, here and now. All the same, irrespective of considerations of when, where and how, we are the architects of our own fortunes. This is the significance of the phrase *sehi kammehi*. This is how the principle of moral accountability, in spite of the cardinal doctrine of *anatta*, operates in Buddhism.